



Chelmsford Borough Council Case study

“As a result of this work, the Council now understands the stress situation in the Council and we feel that we have demonstrated a commitment to the well-being of our employees by reacting to the findings of the ASSET survey with the action plan. We are now keen to ensure that stress risk assessment is an ongoing process and are committed to carrying out further audits to assess the impact of these interventions.”

Frank McKeown, Health and Safety Advisor, Chelmsford Borough Council

The Project

Chelmsford Borough Council (CBC) employs over 1000 members of permanent staff and has had a stress policy in place since 1999. By 2005, there were several key drivers for a review of the original policy, including CBC's own commitment to improve staff well-being, the publication of the HSE management standards in 2004 and the improvement notice served on an NHS trust in Dorset, specifically for inadequate management of stress. It was in this context that CBC approached Robertson Cooper to help them with the first stage of their policy review, which was to be a stress audit. Frank McKeown, Health and Safety Advisor from the Council explained:

“We went to Robertson Cooper because we knew ASSET was an established, cost-effective and reliable stress auditing tool which could show us the current situation with regard to stress in the Council.”

ASSET was issued to all permanent staff and was followed up with discussion groups in key areas. The ASSET questionnaire is designed to measure a range of sources of pressure at work, as well as organisational commitment and health outcomes. The vast majority of people completed the questionnaire online, but paper and pencil surveys were available to those who required them. As a result of CBC's marketing efforts before the survey, the overall response rate was an impressive 75% for those using the online version. This meant that the results could be seen as representative of the views of the organisation and also indicated that staff were generally interested in the issue of stress.



The Results

Overall, the results indicated that levels of work pressures were fairly typical of those in other organisations. The area considered to be the greatest source of pressure was pay and benefits. Many staff perceived there to be inequalities in levels of pay – within departments, across departments and in comparison to other Councils. More positively, work-life balance was not considered to be a problem, as staff generally felt good about the flexible working options available to them. As with many organisations, work overload problems became more apparent at senior levels.

Reported risks to health were at a level typical of most other organisations. Again, staff at a supervisory level reported poorer health than other staff, mainly in terms of sleeping problems, headaches and muscular aches and pains.

The level of commitment to the organisation was typical of that found in the general working population and in a large County Council. However, there were significant variations in commitment levels across different groups and levels in the organisation. For example, staff from Recycling Collection reported much lower levels of commitment than most and this was followed up by Robertson Cooper in focus groups. In terms of perceptions of commitment from the organisation, the level reported across the Council was lower than is typical of the general working population. In particular, junior staff perceived very low levels of commitment from the organisation and our research shows that this can have a direct impact on the productivity of staff members and the organisation as a whole.

Using the ASSET online software, CBC were able to compare the results for different groups and doing so revealed a number of stress 'hotspots'. One of these was Parking and Enforcement and focus groups were run to find out the reasons behind these results. One potential explanation for the high stress levels emerged as the level of face-to-face contact with the public and the emotional demands of this type of work. Being able to analyse the data to reveal hotspot areas allowed CBC to direct support resources where they were most needed.

Recommendations and Interventions

The results of the audit were presented to a large group, including stress champions from the different service areas and trade union representatives. The results and recommendations

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were also presented to a senior management group. The recommendations have been structured into an action plan designed to be taken forward by a specific working group within the Council.

A number of recommendations were made based on the results of the ASSET survey and follow-up discussions with staff groups. These ranged from broad recommendations, e.g. the need to review existing communication and consultation styles, to more specific recommendations such as the need to offer role-specific skills training in dealing with difficult people for staff in public facing roles.